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ABSTRACT

Approaches for developing or improving programs for better recruitment and retention of adults are suggested. It is noted that self-improvement and career-enhancement are among the strongest motivations for adults to continue their education. Adults need accurate information about college attendance and assurance that they can compete, along with assistance with aspects of entering college and reordering their lives. A back-to-school orientation program should be visible in the community, attract a sufficient number of participants, and inspire participant follow through. Other important topics are obtaining college credit for prior learning and financing a degree, choosing the right program and college, and balancing work, family, and college demands. In terms of retention, the high cost of financing an education means that the student expects a high quality education and good student services and facilities. An effective retention program should begin with an objective, analytical assessment of what goes on daily in the classrooms, and should include administrative measures to orient and assist faculty, or to take corrective action to ensure quality teaching. Good academic and personal counseling are also essential to a retention program. (SW)

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RECRUIT AND RETAIN ADULT STUDENTS

The Challenge of the 80's--and Beyond: To Create New Faces in Your Classrooms And Keep Them There!

William C. Haponski, Ph. D.

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RECRUIT AND RETAIN ADULT STUDENTS

The Challenge of the 80's--and Beyond:
To Create New Faces In Your Classrooms
And Keep Them There!

Our topic is R & R. Not Rest and Recreation, to be sure, but the opposite. This R & R involves work and more work--Recruitment and Retention.

No one in adult education is surprised when the National Center for Education Statistics reports that adults are the fastest-growing segment of higher education. Adults constituted 37.5 percent of total college enrollment in 1978 and are expected to constitute 47 percent by 1990. We are becoming accustomed to the belief that in a few years, one of every two students will be age twenty-five or older.

And we accept that as the good news. What is the bad news? Our seventeen-year-olds are dwindling in number, and by 1990 those seventeen-year-olds will be twenty-five-year-olds. Paradoxically, in a few years, as more people enter the "graying of America" ranks, the prime adult student market--the twenty-five- to thirty-five-year-old category--may decrease if current participation rates are only maintained. It is necessary for all of us, then, to give serious attention to recruitment and retention.

My remarks are designed primarily for colleges and universities. But other types of agencies such as school districts, learning centers, or public service organizations should also find them pertinent to their adult education programs.

RECRUITMENT

In a simplified--some will say crass--sense, a college or university is a business, and students are its customers. We businessmen and women--educators of adults--must give increasing attention to our marketplace and how to operate in it. If we do, our customers will get a quality service at a reasonable price, and they will go away satisfied. And every business person knows that a satisfied customer is the best kind of advertisement.

In the November 3, 1982 issue of Chronicle of Higher Education, James J. Unland, an investment banker, gave some advice to the academies. He said, "Not only do the traditional markets need to be tapped more effectively, but new markets must be created. Many institutions are already marketing programs for the continuing education of adults." What he left unsaid is that many are not. I believe that the majority of those institutions that are not could find themselves in serious trouble. Colleges and universities that have effective recruitment and retention programs are going to hold a great advantage in this increasingly competitive environment over those that do not.

Our purpose, then, is to explore guidelines, contents, and means for developing or improving programs for better recruitment and retention of adults. Hopefully the exploration will uncover new possibilities for examination. But even if we find nothing that is entirely new and promising, certainly if we review basics, and if we are moved to take another look at what we are doing on campus or in our adult education programs wherever they are to be found, we will have gained something from the exploration.

In the consumption process, the consumer must first be made aware of the product or service; then he must be led to see how it could satisfy his needs; and then he must be convinced to purchase it. He must believe that if he does, his life will be improved, and if he doesn't, it may stagnate or diminish. Self-improvement and career-enhancement

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are among the strongest motivations in the process.

Too many divisions and schools of continuing education and other offices in our academic structure seem to be satisfied that the potential students out there maintain their status quo. The division or school is there, as it always has been; it advertises dutifully as it always has done; and it tries to present credible programs as it always has done. So what more is needed? Many colleges and universities have found that much more is needed. More ambitious, active recruitment is needed, and they have adopted back to school orientation programs as one of the important means to higher enrollments.

Back to School Orientation Programs

The Winter 1981 issue of Continuing Higher Education carried an article by Frank B. DiSilvestro entitled, "Student Services for Adults: An Emerging Academic Service." Professor DiSilvestro outlined services at twelve major universities. Back to School orientation programs are among the prominent services at several institutions.

Charles McCabe, one of my former adult students, and I spent a good deal of time in research for our recent book, Back to School: The College Guide for Adults. We have also conducted back to school orientations in a variety of settings. In contacting adult students, faculty, and administrators throughout the United States and Canada, we confirmed certain major themes that previous researchers regularly reported: adults exhibit a high level of anxiety over their ability to compete at college; they are concerned about how to pay for college; and they wonder how they are going to be able to balance all those work, family, and college demands.

We found that their fears can be ultimately overcome by these things: In the preparing and deciding stage (pre-enrollment) they need accurate information about the process of going to college, coupled with assurance that they can compete, and assistance with aspects of entering college and reordering their lives. Then they need actual participation--and success--as a student.

Many of you have heard of the fearful adult who sits in her car in the parking lot a long, long time before getting up enough courage to go into the continuing education office and find out about being an adult student. Every college has a similar story. How many students never get so far as the door of our offices? They are afraid of the unknown. If you are to enroll such students, you must reach out to them. In addition to the ones who are afraid, many potential students out there simply are not aware of how college could make their lives better. You have an information dissemination problem of large proportions to overcome, and a good back to school orientation program will help you get started.

The Ingredients of a Good Back to School Orientation Program

What are the ingredients of a good back to school orientation program? The program must:

Have visibility in the community
Attract a sufficient number of participants
Provide detailed, accurate information,
assurance, and assistance in overcoming
obstacles
Inspire participants to act

What must the program not be? It must not be narrowly self-serving for the institution.

Let's examine these elements one by one. First, visibility in the community.

Advertising and publicity are necessary, of course. By planning ahead, you can use your current advertising means to better advantage without incurring additional costs. Pay particular attention to the timing and positioning of your advertisements. Programs and courses that are routine may be relegated to less prominent positions while you highlight your back to school program. For instance, you might want to announce it on the first page of your bulletin, or in the middle spread, or on the back page. The best timing for your advertisements will vary by community, but generally a few weeks before the opening of a new term is good for initial meetings while interest in enrollment is high.

A special advertising campaign--newspaper, radio, TV advertisements--to announce your back to school program can be effective. But they can also be expensive. Fortunately, the initiation of a program of this kind is good news, especially since the statistics on participation of adults are surprising to most people. With proper news releases and other media contacts you should be able to get free publicity. Then, once you have an ongoing program, semester after semester, you can still get free publicity by proper management of your program. For example, each semester you might invite a prominent or interesting person (someone who provides a unique "angle" on education) to be part of your program. In publicizing this part, you will be drawing attention to the whole. Or you might take the show on the road occasionally, to local libraries, YWCA's, or other civic organizations that will be pleased to publicize your program for the benefit of their constituents. You can't let the program become routine or you will lose your visibility. For large metropolitan areas where publicity in the major media is impossible, you may have success by targeting on the "communities" within the area and using neighborhood media such as the smaller newspapers, shopping guides, and posters.

Second, you must attract a sufficient number of participants in order to ensure institutional support on a continuing basis. At first you might not attract a large number while you are searching for the best components and timing. But if the program is basically good it should grow. Put yourself in the place of the people you are trying to attract. Determine their needs and let that determine program content and timing. As in the Goldilocks story, you will want a program that is not too long, and not too short, but just right. If it's too short it won't seem worthwhile; if it's too long it will become burdensome to participants. (One way to conduct the longer, more content-filled program without it becoming burdensome, though, is to award college credit for credit-worthy aspects of the program.) Timing is important. If you hold the program in the evenings in certain metropolitan areas you might get a poor turnout because people won't go out at night unless absolutely necessary. A weekend might be better for them. On the other hand, in a smaller community where night travel is not so much of a problem, unless you do hold your program in the evening you might not attract many people. Gear the length and timing of your program components to what will best serve the needs of people in <u>your</u> area.

Third, your program must provide detailed, accurate information, assurance that participants who subsequently enroll in college can be successful, and assistance in overcoming obstacles. If the length of your program will not allow you to cover all the aspects of the adult college experience that you feel to be essential, be sure you refer the participants to appropriate references. In writing <u>Back to School: The College Guide for Adults</u>, we tried to envision the chronology in the prospective and enrolled adult student's decision-making process. We arranged our material with that in mind. The book begins by trying to overcome anxiety and by providing information on why college can be important to a person's self-improvement and career-enhancement. It then progresses sequentially through each of the major concerns and decision points that adults face, both prior to enrolling and then later as students. A book such as this will be a good reference for your program leader and a meaningful text for your participants. I will later list other references that might be helpful with aspects of

your program.

In conducting a program, you might begin with a session that introduces self-assessment instruments. One of the major problems adults have is to decide on career directions. They are searching for what career best suits their interests and matches their abilities. If you have a computer career guidance system such as SIGI--System of Interactive Guidance and Information--at your institution or in your community, make arrangements for your participants to use it. They should find this to be extremely helpful. If you don't have such a computer-based system, select one or more of the written instruments such as the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory, or the Career Assessment Inventory, or the Self-Directed Search. Any of these will provide some basis for further self-assessment during the course of your program.

Other elements of a program might well include such topics as: Relating College to Your Career Needs and Goals, Assessing the Facts of How Adults Can and Do Compete, Choosing the Right Program, and Choosing the Right College. Popular segments have also included: Getting Accepted at College, and Balancing Work, Family, and College Demands.

One essential topic, we have found, is Getting Credit for What You Already Know. Adults are often amazed, and encouraged, that they do not necessarily have to begin college at the beginning, but that they may be able to get significant credit for what they already have done and what they know. They are surprised to find that many colleges accept for credit some or all of the following: proficiency exams, correspondence courses from accredited sources, elements of military service, noncollegiate courses, professional licenses, experiential learning, and some other forms of nontraditional learning. Adults need to know this. After all, an adult who has no previous college work and who can take only one or two courses a semester faces a ten- or fifteen- or twenty-year prospect (one might say, "sentence") of working toward that degree. What a formidable obstacle to enrollment!

Another essential topic is Financing Your Degree. To conduct this portion of your program, a financial aid officer is highly desirable. The world of financial aid is so complex you should try to have an expert to guide discussion and answer questions; otherwise you risk misinforming participants on a matter of vital importance. Later, when they find they have been misinformed, they will be further discouraged, and your program will have lost credibility.

Your program must provide not just guidance in overcoming obstacles, but actual assistance. You must be willing to set up appointments for participants to meet with people at your institution, at other institutions, or at local agencies that will be helpful in solving their problems. You might find that you have to offer screening tests in the basic skills--reading, writing, study strategies, speaking and listening, mathematics--and provide access to remedial courses in those areas. Yes, I know that remedial courses in college are becoming bad words. But the problem will not go away. Michael O'Keefe of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recently reported that thirty to forty percent of high school students who go on to college have to take remedial courses. Remember, the seventeen-year-olds of today soon become the adult students of tomorrow. Just by becoming adults they are not miraculously going to overcome lack of basic skills. The problem will be with us until education has found another, happier solution.

Fourth, your program must inspire your participants to take action. Obviously they are not satisfied with their status quo or they would not have taken part in your program. It is easy enough for them to revert to that status, so you don't have to offer it as an option at the end of your program. Your goal will be to get them either to embark on a serious, planned course to explore other educational and career options, or to enroll soon in the college program that is most appropriate for them.

Finally, I said that a good back to school orientation program must not be narrowly self-serving for the sponsoring institution.

If students want information only about your institution, they do not need a back to school orientation program such as we have been considering. They can simply come to your office to get their information. But such a situation does not serve the broader interests of the community and will not advance your institution beyond its current posture. Rest assured that if you serve your customers' total career and educational needs first, ultimately you will be serving your own. Help your participants to explore all reasonable options. Yes, invite representatives from competing institutions to be a part of your program. If they don't accept, invite them to send materials that you will display for them. Tell your participants about nontraditional opportunities beyond the bounds of their local area, such as accredited external degree programs. Make certain in your advertisements that people know that your orientation program is for them regardless of where they might later choose to enroll. You are going to get enrollments from your group of participants anyhow, quite certainly more than enough to pay for your program. After all, these people will have come onto your campus, spent some time with your staff, talked with some of your students, and they have begun to feel at home. They know that you have their best interests at heart and they are confident in your guidance. Don't worry that some of them may enroll in your competing institution. Be glad for them, be glad for your competitor, and be glad for yourself as you count the enrollments at your own institution from among your group.

RETENTION

Statistics on attrition of adult students are difficult to obtain with a high degree of reliability because most adults are part-time students. When a full-time student drops out for reasons other than leave of absence, that person usually can be counted as lost. But a part-time student who drops out is likely to be back next semester or the semester after that. Probably at least as many adults drop out for extended periods or permanently, though, as do younger students. A fifty percent attrition rate seems likely to pertain at many institutions. As we know, having a student drop out is not necessarily bad, either for the student or the institution. What is bad is to lose students that should, for their own good and for ours, complete their programs. From a marketing viewpoint, a retention program is a necessity to conserve human resources and contain loss of institutional revenue.

Let's turn to our student-as-consumer analogy again. We are told that education is the second largest expense in the family budget, trailing only the purchase of a residence. If more than one family member goes to college, it can be the largest expense. Even wher low-cost institutions are providing the services, the consumer is investing time that could be devoted to employment or other means of self-improvement, so the actual cost can be high indeed.

Especially in the purchase of high-priced items and services, the customer expects to get her money's worth. She expects the quality to be good, and, if problems develop, that the seller will correct them with a minimum of inconvenience to her. Your challenge is basically two-fold: to provide a high quality education, and, in doing so, to provide means and outlets for individual problem-solving.

What goes on in the daily activities at your institution may seem unimportant because they are commonplace. But the quality of those activities as they affect the student is essential to retention. Let's take a brief look at only three ingredients of that quality--teaching, student services, and facilities.

There is nothing so critical to student satisfaction as good teaching. Yet, because getting at problems with teaching involves confrontation between administrators and

faculty, it is an area very likely to be gingerly skirted instead of confronted. I suggest that many of us in positions to affect what goes on in classrooms--and I suspect that includes most of us--would do well to become a student for a period at our own institution.

What a different perspective!

As executive vice president and academic dean, and as a teacher at the same time, I also became a student at my college, and so did my wife. We took several courses together, and in doing so I learned (or relearned) a lot about what an adult student expects from teachers. After the first five minutes of awkwardness in that first class, I found that both the instructor and you will forget other relationships. The only one that now matters is the teacher-student relationship. As a student you will expect your classes to begin on time, progress through meaningful instruction, and end on time--not twenty minutes early or late, but on time. You will expect examinations to be well-designed and conducted, and you will expect to be able to get help when you're in difficulty. An instructor's posted office hours take on significance, and you expect them to be kept. Above all, you expect to be treated with respect and consideration.

Are those expectations unreasonable? Of course not. Yet look at how much trouble some institutions have in getting consistently high quality performance from their teachers.

Any effective retention program must begin with an objective, analytical assessment of what goes on daily in the classrooms, and must include administrative measures to orient faculty, to assist them to present the best possible instruction, and, when necessary, to insist upon, and get, corrective action taken to ensure that quality teaching is taking place.

All of this is so basic, but so hard to achieve, and so necessary to the success of your program that you cannot skirt this problem area just because it is difficult.

Student services are taken for granted perhaps even more than teaching. They are necessary in order to enroll, instruct, and graduate students. But a good retention program will not take them for granted. The inconsiderate, rude staff member who deals with students on a daily basis causes attrition. The well-meaning but ineffective staff member causes attrition. And we could go on and on. Bluntly put, to retain students, in many cases you need to retrain staff.

Facilities. In times of budget crises, facilities get neglected. But even in those times much can be done at little cost to ensure student safety and reasonable comfort. Students confronted constantly with snack machines that don't work, or parking lots that are dark because lights are missing, or dirty classrooms, will not, and should not, accept budgetary problems as an excuse for institutional neglect of the basics.

Having been a student for some time in my own institution provided me with new insights to the importance of good teaching, student services, and facilities to student satisfaction and retention. I am convinced it is an exercise that will lead to improved retention of students.

Now let's consider programmatic aspects in retention.

Many, many students have pointed out to me the importance of actual <u>success</u> as imperative if students are to maintain the motivation necessary to continue. My coauthor and I were convinced it was so important that we devoted half of our book to aspects for succeeding.

In designing your program, consider that many adults need guidance especially in these areas:

How much can I handle?
How can I get good grades and satisfaction from my courses?
How can I improve my basic educational skills?
What should I do when I think I'm getting into trouble?
What are my resources for coping?
How can I really know that my selected career direction is the right one?

A retention program with sessions that address some or all of these aspects of succeeding is particularly important for those students who are in their first or second terms of college, whether they have never been to college, or whether this is their second time around. At this early stage they are most vulnerable to the anxieties that may cause them to drop out. More advanced students also will get a lot from the sessions since most students perceive that there is always room for improvement, and frustrations do not necessarily diminish as one becomes a college-going veteran.

Good counseling, no less than good teaching, is essential to retention. The student in trouble must know that someone will listen and someone will help. Unfortunately, many institutions do not concentrate their counseling resources during the periods in which their adult students can most use them.

Consider this situation: A small college operates an evening division four nights a week. The continuing education staff, consisting of a director, an assistant director, two secretaries, and some work-study students operates normally on a nine-to-five basis. A retired History professor is hired to provide administrative services and counseling from six to eight p.m. There is no continuous supervision of the evening session by the continuing education staff. Other than the part-time retired professor who is not trained adequately to help them, students have no one to turn to when they take classes.

Fortunately, the director is insightful and realizes that changing times will require changing habits. The staff reorients its office hours and, with the help of the director of counseling services, is able to provide a professional administrator or counselor on each of the four nights. Teachers and students have someone to contact; administrative supervision of teaching is improved.

The solution here was obvious and basic. But such solutions are not necessarily easy to affect since people must change hours of normal work. Problems similar to this exist at many institutions. If someone in authority will not recognize these problems and address them, students will be lost.

Good academic and personal counseling are necessary components of a retention program, but just as essential is career counseling. Most adults do not view education as an end; it is a means to career enhancement. It translates ultimately to higher pay, a more satisfying career, and a more satisfying life. Career counseling must therefore be integrated into your program at its various stages. If your institution does not have a strong capability in this area, of course you should press to get one. In the meantime, you might integrate into your retention program such local resources as labor department counselors or counselors from learning centers or volunteer agencies in the community.

IMPLEMENTATION OF RECRUITING AND RETENTION PROGRAMS

We have discussed guidelines, content, and means for programs. To conclude, let's look briefly at implementation.

Back to school orientation programs and retention programs may be as simple as one evening seminars followed by a social hour, as extensive as a full-term credit course, or something in between. Many formats have been tried and many have been successful. Regardless of format and length, you must ensure that content is solid. The prospective or enrolled student has come to the program to be informed, guided, and assisted. It is better for you to include too much at first than too little.

Fortunately, you will get eager help in running a program, and it will probably cost you little or nothing beyond current expenditures. Staff members generally like to participate, and all that may be necessary for you is to reorient work priorities so that recruitment and retention come high on the list, assign program responsibilities, and guide the program as it progresses. Continuing education staff, admissions staff, counseling staff, financial aid staff, and others can, and probably will be glad, to contribute.

Some of your best help will be free or inexpensive--adult students themselves. In conducting these programs and in talking to others who conduct them, we have found that adult students who are given some guidance and resources will contribute immensely to a program's success. They are enthusiastic, and because they are students, they are especially credible sources of practical advice and assurance. Peer counseling groups are popular, and successful, at many institutions.

The costs of your program will be recovered in tuition income. In many cases, depending on the tuition structure of a particular institution, only one additional student recruited or retained is sufficient to pay for the entire cost of a semester's program.

I have avoided giving prescriptions for successful programs. Melvyn Raiman of Raiman Associates in Decatur, Illinois conducts marketing seminars all over the country for college faculty and administrators. He says, "All schools and departments face recruiting and attrition problems; however, the solutions are not the same for everyone. . . . each institution needs to develop individual marketing strategies."

I have tried, by going back to basics, and by drawing on what has been successful, to outline major considerations for you to develop or improve your recruiting and retention programs for adults. The challenge of the 80's, and quite certainly beyond, is to create new faces in your classrooms, and to keep them there!

ESSENTIAL REFERENCES FOR RECRUITMENT AND

RETENTION OF ADULT STUDENTS

General:

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3. Guide to Credit by Examination (American Council on Education, 1981).
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Financing Your Degree:

9. Don't Miss Out: The Ambitious Student's Guide to Scholarships and Loans, Robert Leider (Octameron Associates, revised annually).
10. Paying for Your Education: A Guide for Adult Learners (College Board/Scribner's, 1983).

Note: Reference No. 8 is only available direct from ETC Associates, Box 11B-E, [redacted] Oneida, NY 13421 ($3.00). ETC also ships No. 1 ($9.20), No. 6 (~~$5.25~~ $7.20), No. 9 ($3.25), and No. 10 ($9.20). NYS residents add tax. The other references normally will be found in libraries or college admissions offices.